

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/DECISION RECORD

EA Number: AZ-410-2006-024

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: N/A

BLM Office: Safford Field Office

DECISION:

It is my decision to implement the proposed action as described and stipulated in the Black Hills Back County Byway, Solomon Pass, East Bonita Rim Roads Maintenance Environmental Assessment, AZ-410-2006-024. Implementing the proposed road maintenance will improve public safety and vehicle access, protect resources, and reduce scheduled road maintenance costs. The proposed action resolves defined issues, meets the purpose and need for action, and would not affect any critical elements and other resources described within the environmental assessment. This action will not impact the National Energy Policy Issues.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based upon the Black Hills Back County Byway, Solomon Pass, East Bonita Rim Roads Maintenance Environmental Assessment, AZ-040-2006-024, I conclude that this action is in conformance with the approved land use plan, Safford District Resource Management Plan, and meets the objectives of the Gila Box RNCA Management Plan. Implementation of the proposed action will result in no significant impact to the human environment. Therefore, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary.

MITIGATION/STIPULATION MEASURES:

General Stipulations

1. Construction crew is responsible for controlling vehicular traffic at the construction site during both work and non-work hours. Non-work hours traffic control and public safety shall be provided through cautionary signing and other control methods.
2. Project work would occur on week days reducing visitor access conflicts.
3. All vehicles shall remain on existing roads, parking areas, turn-arounds, or disturbed sites unless involved in work on a site authorized for disturbance.
4. Excess soil and rock shall be spread back onto the road, left in a berm along the side of the road, spread evenly across flat surfaces, or properly removed and deposited at an authorized site.
5. Rehabilitation work including seeding, mulching, matting, water control devices, and other measures would be provided should unauthorized disturbance occur.
6. Use certified weed-free hay as sediment catch in areas where new disturbance produces excessive erosion.

Cultural Resources

1. Any archaeological or historical artifacts or remains, or vertebrate fossils discovered during maintenance and use shall be left intact and undisturbed, all work in the area shall stop immediately, and the Assistant Field Manager for Program Manager for Planning and Monitoring shall be notified immediately. Commencement of operations shall be allowed upon clearance by the Assistance Field Manager.
2. An additional cultural and paleontological resource survey may be required in the event the project location is changed or additional surface disturbing operations are added to

project after the initial survey. Any such survey would have to be completed prior to commencement of operations.

3. If in connection with operations under this authorization, any human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects or objects of cultural patrimony as defined in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (P.L. 101-601; Stat. 3048; 25 U.S.C. 3001) are discovered, the permittee shall stop operations in the immediate area of the discovery, protect the remains and objects, and immediately notify the Assistance Field Manager for Program Manager for Planning and Monitoring of the discovery. The permittee shall continue to protect the immediate area of the discovery until notified by the Program Manager for Planning and Monitoring that operations may resume.

Noxious Plant Stipulations

1. All equipment and vehicles would be power washed before going to the site to decrease the likelihood of introducing noxious weeds.
2. All work must be performed with the intention to incur only the minimum amount of disturbance necessary to achieve the objectives in order to decrease the establishment of noxious weeds.
3. Hay and mulch brought to the project site must be Arizona Crop Improvement Association, Inc. (ACIA) certified weed-free. ACIA certification matches standards and procedural requirements endorsed by the North American Weed Management Association. The Arizona Department of Agriculture recognizes ACIA certification as meeting the standards necessary to distinguish weed-free hay and mulch grown in Arizona as free from Federal and Arizona prohibited and regulated noxious weeds.
4. Rehabilitation work including seeding, mulching and vertical mulching, matting, water control devices, and other measures would have biologist input to reduce introduction of non-native species. Seed must be ACIA certified weed-free and preferably from Southeast Arizona.

Wildlife Stipulations

1. Notify wildlife biologist when maintenance schedule is finalized and work will be performed on the Bull Gap Road grade (south end of the East Rim Road).
2. Wildlife biologist will conduct a raptor survey in March, 2006 ¼ mile upstream and ¼ mile downstream of the beginning of the Bull Gap Road grade in Bonita Creek canyon.
3. Wildlife biologist will conduct a yellow-billed cuckoo survey ¼ mile upstream and ¼ mile downstream in accordance with survey protocol before beginning project work on the Bull Gap Road grade.

COMPLIANCE MONITORING:

Gila Box RNCA staff, Force Account, and Law Enforcement Rangers will monitor and document road maintenance needs on an as needed basis.

/Tom Schnell/
Assistant Safford Field Office Manager

Date: March 17, 2006

**Solomon Pass, Black Hills Back
Country Byway and Bonita Creek East
Rim Road Maintenance
Environmental Assessment**

AZ-410-2006-024

**Bureau of Land Management
Safford Field Office**

**Prepared by:
Jeff Wilbanks
Outdoor Recreation Planner
March 17, 2006**

Solomon Pass, Black Hills Back Country Byway And Bonita Creek East Rim Road Maintenance Environmental Assessment

EA Number: AZ-410-2006-024

Lease/Serial/Case File No.: N/A

Applicant: Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

BLM Office: Safford Field Office

Location of Proposed Action: Solomon Pass Road-T6S, R27E, Sec.29,20,16,9,10. Black Hills Byway-T7S, R29E, Sec.6; T6S, R29E, Sec.32,29,28,27,22,23. Bonita Creek East Rim Road-T6S, R28E, Sec.21,16,9,10,3,4; T5S, R28E, Sec.33,32,31,30,19,24,13 Gila and Salt River Meridian; see attached maps.

EA Team Leader: Jeff Wilbanks, Outdoor Recreation Planner.

CONFORMANCE WITH APPLICABLE LAND USE PLAN

The Proposed Action is subject to the following land use plan:

Name of Plan: Safford District Resource Management Plan (RMP)

Date Approved: Record of Decision Part I, September 1992; Record of Decision Part II, July 1994.

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the applicable land use plan:

CHECK ONE

(X) YES () NO

TA07 Reconstruct the following roads to provide or improve vehicle access for administration and use of the public lands. Three miles of Left Fork of Markham Creek Road, Three miles of Military trail, one half mile of Virgus Canyon Road, Five and one half miles of Jackson Cabin Road, one mile of Buckeye Canyon Road, and *other roads* as determined in the future to be included in the District Transportation Plan. RMP page 27.

PURPOSE/NEED FOR PROPOSED ACTION

Purpose of the proposed action is to improve vehicle access to public land and public safety, protect resources through proper road bed maintenance and drainage, and reduce over-all road maintenance costs.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action

Road maintenance for Solomon Pass, Black Hills Back Country Byway (Byway) and the Bonita Creek East Rim Roads include brush removal/trimming, rock crushing and road grading, rolling dips, slope cutting, widening, cattle guard and culvert replacement or cleaning, and run-off ditch cleaning (see specifics below). Maintenance would be limited to existing disturbance including the road bed, ditches and berms except for one slope cutting, three road bed widenings and installation of about 2 miles of water pipeline (see specifics below). Brush and limbs would be removed up to 3 feet from the road berm and placed in drainages to reduce erosion. Barrel cactus growing within the berm would be relocated at least 3 feet from the road. The road berm and rocky road bed sites would be crushed and brought back onto the road surface by a rock crusher tractor. The material would then be evenly spread over the road surface by a road grader. Portions of the roads that do not need rock crushing would receive grading.

Road maintenance would be completed by a Coronado National Forest Service crew during the Spring/Summer of 2006, however the project may not be completed until 2007. The project would take about six weeks to complete beginning with Solomon Pass in April then moving to the Black Hills Byway and finishing with the East Rim Road. Work would begin on the north end of the East Rim Road during late May or early June. Work at the south end of the East Rim Road (on the Bull Gap grade into Bonita Creek) would be scheduled after June.

The crew, containing 4 to 6 members, would be operating pick-up trucks, chain saws, rock crusher tractor, dozer, and a road grader. All vehicles would remain on existing roads, parking areas, turn-arounds, or disturbed sites unless working on a site authorized for disturbance. All equipment and vehicles would be power washed before going to the site to lessen the chance of introducing noxious weeds. Project work would occur on week days reducing visitor access conflicts. The crew would be responsible for controlling traffic flow through or around work sites during both work and non-work hours. Non-work hour traffic flow and public safety would be provided through cautionary signing and other traffic control methods. Rehabilitation work including seeding, mulching, matting, water control devices, and other measures would be provided should unauthorized disturbance occur.

Solomon Pass Road- Proposal includes approximately 4 miles of road maintenance with brush removal/trimming, rock crushing and road grading, rolling dips, run-off ditch cleaning, 1 cattle guard replacement and 2 cleanings, and up to 5 culvert replacements or cleanings.

Black Hills Byway- Proposal includes approximately 7 miles of road maintenance with brush removal/trimming, rock crushing and road grading, rolling dips, 1 slope cutting, run-off ditch cleaning, 2 cattle guard replacements and 1 cleaning, and up to 30 culvert replacements or cleanings.

East Rim Road- Proposal includes approximately 10 miles of road maintenance with brush removal/trimming, rock crushing and road grading, rolling dips, 2 widenings, run-off ditch cleaning, and about 2 miles of water pipeline reinstallation. The existing pipeline is buried in the middle of the road too close to the surface to allow for road maintenance. The replacement pipeline would be installed along the edge of the road bed under the berm. No new disturbance would be made on the road for at least one mile from Bonita creek. Work on the grade up and out of Bonita Creek would be limited to the existing road bed and ditches.

No Action Alternative

No Action Alternative provides unscheduled periodic road maintenance on priority identified

sections of the roads.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Scoping/Screening Session

Jeff Wilbanks, outdoor recreation planner, and Ron Peru, engineering technician, toured the described roads to discuss project issues and considerations. Richard White, rangeland specialist and Jeff Mingus, livestock permittee, have visited the East Bonita Rim Road. Tim Goodman, wildlife biologist, and Anna Rago, archeologist, also provided project scoping information.

Issues Identified in Scoping

Proposed Action

The following issues identified through the issue identification process are carried forward for additional analysis:

Vegetation- Removing or trimming vegetation will create waste cuttings and barrel cactus may be located within 3 feet of the road including the berms.

Fish and Wildlife- Loose material created by new road disturbance may reach Bonita Creek if allowed to roll off the edge of the road into adjacent side drainages.

Primary wildlife concerns are during the period of this project when the crew will be working on the section of the Bullgap Road (south end of East Rim Road) going up and out of the Bonita Creek canyon area. Noise disturbance to breeding/nesting birds can be detrimental and cause adults to abandon nests and/or young birds to fledge too early.

Depending on when the crew will be in this specific area, there may be various levels of disturbance to different species: Raptors are a concern due to the fact that raptor nests themselves are treated as “special status”, regardless of species. Most raptors in southeastern Arizona begin arriving to their breeding grounds in March. Typically, eggs are laid from mid-April to mid-June and hatch from May to June. Young usually fledge from July to August.

The yellow-billed cuckoo is a candidate species located in Bonita Creek. Western cuckoos arrive on breeding grounds starting mid to late May and pairing occurs in mid-Jun or later. The breeding season takes place from Jun–Aug, with peak occurring mid-Jul to early Aug. Exceptionally late nests (mid-Aug to mid-Sep) have been observed.

Southwestern willow flycatcher territories have not been confirmed in Bonita Creek, however, they may be using this area as a movement corridor as they migrate to their breeding grounds. The species typically migrates from early to mid-April through mid-June. Any construction activities in the canyon should be avoided during these times.

Soil- Disturbance includes the road bed and road berms for road maintenance activities. The slope cut on the Byway and road bed widening and pipeline installation on the East Rim Road would create new soil disturbances.

Water Quality- Storm run-off carrying sediment from newly disturbed work on East Rim Road

may reach the Bonita Creek via side drainages.

Cultural- Archeologist will survey project sites before work begins for cultural artifacts.

Recreation- Road construction may limit or delay vehicles traveling to the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (RNCA) and other dispersed recreation sites on public land.

Issues Identified in Scoping

No Action Alternative

The following issues identified through the issue identification process are carried forward for additional analysis:

Vegetation- Vegetation adjacent to rough sections of road is being crushed by vehicles attempting to avoid bad sections.

Fish and Wildlife- Road ruts and storm run-off is producing excessive erosion on East Rim Road. Sediment may be reaching Bonita Creek via side drainages that cut the road. Excessive sediment may fill gravel beds reducing available spawning areas.

Soil- Excess erosion is occurring where large ruts and run-off areas are developing or occur.

Water Quality- Side drainages cutting the East Rim Road carry excessive sediment originating from rutted and poorly maintained portions of the road. The sediment may eventually reach Bonita Creek reducing water quality.

Cultural- No cultural issues with the No Action Alternative.

Recreation- Condition of the roads is substandard for the current intended purpose of providing visitor access to the Gila Box RNCA. The proposed refinements to East Rim Road may displace some visitor seeking a most primitive four-wheel drive experience.

DESCRIPTION OF IMPACTS

Proposed Action

Vegetation- Typical vegetation in the project area includes; prickly pear, barrel cactus, hedge hog, pencil cholla, creosote, ocotillo, and palo verde. Vegetation would be removed/trimmed within 3 feet of the road including the berm.

Fish and Wildlife- Wildlife may be displaced from the project area during work periods. Project caused disturbance would be temporary with normal wildlife patterns returning following the completion work.

Work occurring during July, August or September on the Bull Gap Road (south East Rim Road) grade out of Bonita Creek may disturb yellow-billed cuckoos and raptors on nesting sites.

Soil- Soil and rock within the berm would be crushed and brought back onto the road surface and spread evenly over the surface. The new road surface, slope cut and pipeline installation

would be loose until compacted by use and weather.

Water Quality- The newly disturbed areas on East Rim Road may produce a temporary increase in sediment load. However, hay bails or collars should catch excessive sediment before reaching Bonita Creek. East Rim Road is approximately .25 to 1.0 mile from Bonita Creek once the road ascends out of the creek.

Cultural- There is no known cultural properties within the project area.

Recreation- Road maintenance crew and work activities may temporarily disturb visitor access, recreation activities and visitor experiences. Vehicle access and recreation activities would continue, although there could be periodic delays while work is underway. The proposal would improve vehicle access and visitor safety to the Gila Box RNCA and public lands north of Safford. Increases in visitor use may occur as a direct result from improved vehicle access.

The following critical elements were examined during the review process: None were found affected.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED		CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED	
	YES	NO		YES	NO
ACECS		X	Solid Waste		X
Air Quality		X	VRM		X
Cultural Resources		X	Water Quality		X
Environmental Justice/ Socioeconomics		X	Wetland/Riparian		X
Hazardous Materials		X	Wilderness		X
Flood Plains		X	Wild & Scenic River		X
Native American Religious Concerns.		X	T&E Animal Species		X
Nonnative/Invasive Plants		X	T&E Plant Species		X
Prime/Unique Farmlands		X	National Energy Policy		X

No Action Alternative

Vegetation- Vegetation along the side of the road through rough sections is being damaged or crushed.

Fish and Wildlife- Habitat damage results from creation of alternate routes to avoid rough sections of road, and excessive erosion from new disturbance and poor road bed condition.

Soil- The existing condition of the described roads may lead to excessive erosion, road widening and creating alternant by-pass routes.

Water Quality- Poorer water quality will result from the lack of adequate road maintenance, alternate routing to avoid rough sections, and the disintegration of the road bed.

Cultural- There is no known cultural properties within the project area (see Mitigation).

Recreation- Safety and access concerns relating to use of two wheel low clearance vehicles would remain unresolved. Vehicle access to recreation opportunities on the east side of Bonita Creek would be limited to heavy duty four-wheel drive vehicles and experienced operators. The proposed refinements to East Rim Road may displace some visitor seeking a most primitive four-wheel drive experience.

The following critical elements were examined during the review process: None were found affected.

CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED		CRITICAL ELEMENTS (required by federal law)	AFFECTED	
	YES	NO		YES	NO
ACECS		X	Solid Waste		X
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Cultural Resources		X	Water Quality		X
Environmental Justice/ Socioeconomics		X	Wetland/Riparian		X
Hazardous Materials		X	Wilderness		X
Flood Plains		X	Wild & Scenic River		X
Native American Religious Concerns.		X	T&E Animal Species		X
Nonnative/Invasive Plants		X	T&E Plant Species		X
Prime/Unique Farmlands		X	National Energy Policy		X

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Proposed Action

Management actions on pages 9-30 in the final Gila Box National RNCA Plan (BLM 1998) (available for review at the Safford Field Office) are being implemented, and are altering the cumulative human impacts to the area. Cumulative impacts have been analyzed in the final Gila Box RNCA Plan, Environmental Assessment (pages 44-56).

Facilities such as Riverview and Owl Canyon Campgrounds, Lee Trailhead, Serna Cabin and Old Safford Bridge Picnic Areas, and Boat Launch Area have already been constructed. Designated roads and signing has been established and high impact roads in riparian areas

closed. The designated roads contribute in varying degrees to the existing visual resource impacts. The additional development including the proposed action would contribute little to the cumulative impacts in and around the RNCA.

Several road improvement projects have been completed in the area including the Byway in Greenlee County, Safford-Morenci Trailhead, Karney Camp, Serna Cabin, West Rim, Salt Trap, and Red Knoll Roads.

No Action Alternative

No additional cumulative impacts would be realized through the No Action Alternative. The existing management actions of periodic road maintenance and repair are already being implemented. Cumulative impacts have been analyzed in the final Gila Box RNCA Plan, Environmental Assessment (pages 44-56).

MITIGATION/STIPULATION MEASURES

General Stipulations

1. Construction crew is responsible for controlling vehicular traffic at the construction site during both work and non-work hours. Non-work hours traffic control and public safety shall be provided through cautionary signing and other control methods.
2. Project work would occur on week days reducing visitor access conflicts.
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discovery. The permittee shall continue to protect the immediate area of the discovery until notified by the Program Manager for Planning and Monitoring that operations may resume.

Noxious Plant Stipulations

1. All equipment and vehicles would be power washed before going to the site to decrease the likelihood of introducing noxious weeds.
2. All work must be performed with the intention to incur only the minimum amount of disturbance necessary to achieve the objectives in order to decrease the establishment of noxious weeds.
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4. Rehabilitation work including seeding, mulching and vertical mulching, matting, water control devices, and other measures would have biologist input to reduce introduction of non-native species. Seed must be ACIA certified weed-free and preferably from Southeast Arizona.

Wildlife Stipulations

1. Notify wildlife biologist when maintenance schedule is finalized and work will be performed on the Bull Gap Road grade (south end of the East Rim Road).
2. Wildlife biologist will conduct a raptor survey in March, 2006 ¼ mile upstream and ¼ mile downstream of the beginning of the Bull Gap Road grade in Bonita Creek canyon.
3. Wildlife biologist will conduct a yellow-billed cuckoo survey ¼ mile upstream and ¼ mile downstream in accordance with survey protocol before beginning project work on the Bull Gap Road grade.

AGENCIES and INDIVIDUALS CONSULTED

Safford Field Office and Gila Box RNCA staffs.
Jeff Mingus, livestock permittee in the project area.

References Cited

BLM 1991. Safford District Resource Management Plan, Environmental Impact Statement. Safford, AZ: BLM Safford Field Office.

BLM 1998. Gila Box Management Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record. Safford, AZ: BLM Safford Field Office.

Preparer: Jeff Wilbanks, Outdoor Recreation Planner

Date: March 17, 2006

Attachments: Project maps and Cultural Resource Compliance Documentation Record